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ABSTRACT

A three-step approach in the evaluation of students' compositions in college freshman English courses is described in this article. The student, after identifying his errors and determining possible corrections, submits an abbreviated version of the text with corrections for final review by the instructor. It is felt that with a more refined evaluation technique, the teaching of composition would become more effective. (RL)

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EVALUATION TECHNIQUES FOR IMPROVING COMPOSITIONS

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You are no doubt aware of the value of good literature as a source of motivational topics and as a model for various aspects of composition. You may feel that you are doing all that you can in the area of motivation, yet the student's endeavor is generally a ragged offshoot of the original inspiration: although the basic idea is good, ambiguity, poor development and/or mechanical errors have ruined the effectiveness of his writing. Then, as an instructor, you may wonder what else you can do. Why not check your method of evaluating student compositions?

Can the student use your notations on his composition to improve what he is writing? Does he have the opportunity to show you that he understnads what the error is and knows how to correct it? In attempting to answer these questions satisfactorily, I have experimented with various procedures at the junior high, high school, and college freshman levels. Now I am using, in college freshman composition classes, a method which at first seems laborious—above and beyond the call of duty—but which actually becomes more and more practical as the term progresses.

First it is necessary for the student to have, either in his rhetoric text or on a separate paper, a list of the symbols for composition errors keyed to the page numbers in the text that will help him correct his errors. For example, an instructor may mark a comma error "P1" according to a chart; then the student can refer to the indicated page or pages for clarification of his error. As any experienced instructor knows, some errors—particularly errors in thought or organization—are not explainable with predetermined page numbers and therefore require brief explanations written on the compositions. Sometimes, too, the legend for the correction symbol provides the necessary explanation of the error, as in the use of "D2," which may be listed as "inappropriately low level of diction." In any case, the first step is logically the proper identification of the error and its possible solution.

The next step involves the corrections the student will make on a separate sheet of paper to be returned with the composition at a subsequent class meeting. The separate sheet enables the teacher to scan the original and the corrections side by side. Corrections do not have to be numbered on the sheet, but they should be done in the order the errors occurred in the composition. *Brevity* is the keynote for the correction sheet, with accuracy and clarity its essential concomitants. For instance, a composition reading ". . . Aristotle

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who . . . " will have a P1 comma error indicated; so the student shows the correction on his sheet as "Aristotle, who—because a nonrestrictive clause is set off by commas." The teacher can then see that the correction is indicated within the original context in the briefest possible manner. That is followed by an explanation in the minimum of words. Students are told to make explanations as brief as possible, without impairing clarity, so that the time of both student and teacher may be saved.

There are some other ways the student can show corrections. For an inappropriately-low-level-of-diction error, the student needs only to substitute another expression that he feels is suitable. When, on occasion, there is an error involving the organization of an entire paragraph, it may be necessary for the student to rewrite that whole section. The second step is completed as soon as the student returns his composition and corrections to the instructor.

Hopefully, the teacher will perform one final step, which has already been suggested above—scanning the original and the corrections for evidence that the student has a satisfactory understanding of his errors and of their corrections. Thus, there should be just three steps to the process, two by the instructor and one by the student. However, if there is some difficulty still apparent, the instructor may wish to return a paper with a further explanation and a request that the student confirm his understanding of the problem.

Many students today have sufficient interest in making progress in composition and have enough motivation because of the ever-present need for a grade that they will achieve good results with the evaluation program I have described. If students also realize that, as the weeks go by, the composition standards rise, then they will work harder to overcome errors and improve writing techniques than they will when the same grading scale prevails throughout the term. Nevertheless, any method is not devoid of some frustrations; consequently, a teacher may find that a spelling error is "corrected" with a further misspelling. So-called "honest" mistakes are sometimes made, it is true; but it pays to be wary of pure carelessness. In regard to typing errors, I simply forewarn a student that he, not his typewriter, must be charged for any mistakes. Despite advice and admonitions—and because *Homo sapiens* tends toward slothfulness, with the college freshman being no exception—the student may have to suffer the penalty of grade-cutting for corrections not acceptably made. But such an ax I prefer not to haul out of the woodshed of coercion unless absolutely necessary!

In conclusion, then, it has been my basic reasoning that if a student has his problem identified, if he has access to its solution, and if he writes down the correction *with the reason* for it, he has traveled a road whereby learning can take place. Perhaps you, too, will find that your evaluation techniques can be expanded in some such way to make the teaching of composition more effective than it traditionally has been.